

New database aims to improve criminal justice

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The local criminal justice system will soon have a new tool available designed to make their work more efficient and potentially make communities safer.

State Controller David McCoy rolled out the Criminal Justice Law Enforcement Automated Data Services program, or CJLEADS, Thursday in Boone to a group of about 20 law enforcement officers.

CJLEADS combines more than 41 million criminal data files from several existing applications into one web-based database available to trained officers and court personnel.

The data, which includes warrants, jail records, court records, parole and probation statuses, sex offender registries and DMV information, was previously contained in several different systems.

That hodgepodge of systems meant that information could fall through the cracks, McCoy said.

"We have standup systems and they're managed well, but they don't talk to each other," McCoy said.

CJLEADS also allows officers to create a "watch list" for a particular offender that will notify them by email if the offender's status changes. It also displays icons that warn officers immediately if someone they are approaching has an order for arrest, concealed weapon permit or past history of violence or drug abuse.

Providing as much information as possible to officers should help them anticipate potential dangers, and an important concept for developers was "providing safety for those who make us safe," McCoy said.

The program began as a pilot in Wake County in July 2010 and is now in the last of three deployment phases. About \$10 million has already been invested in creating the system, and its total cost is expected to reach \$27 million, McCoy said.

McCoy explained how criminal justice hit home with him March 5, 2008, when UNC-Chapel Hill Student Body President Eve Carson was murdered 200 yards from his home in Chapel Hill.

Investigators learned after her death that one of the men charged with her murder had not been properly supervised by his probation officer. Two days before Carson's death, Demario Atwater had appeared in court, but his records were sent to a different courtroom, McCoy said.

"This wasn't white noise," McCoy said. "We heard it at the McCoy household, and the General Assembly heard it too, and they said, 'Enough.'"

Later that year, the General Assembly ordered a system to be created to better integrate criminal justice data, he said.

After focus groups and interviews, the system was born, and McCoy said his department worked hard to ensure it was intuitive and far-reaching for its more than 30,000 users.

“Our intent is not to replace any of their current sources,” said Sondra Phillips, business operations manager for the state controller’s office. “The legislature mandated that we develop it; they didn’t mandate that they use it.” Phillips added that they had received positive feedback at each of their previous sessions and expected that all who attended the workshops would use the system. Capt. Jeff Virginia of the Watauga County Sheriff’s Office said he already sees the potential for using the system on the current vehicle-mounted laptops, called mobile data terminals.

The office currently contracts with a company and pays setup fees and monthly service charges to use the DCI system on the laptops. CJLEADS will allow them to do nearly the same thing for free, and the office will save money by not having to train officers on DCI.

“We can put more mobile data terminals in the field at a whole lot lower cost and still get most of the services,” Virginia said.

McCoy added Thursday that other agencies have computed millions of dollars in savings simply through the time saved with the new system.

“Taxpayers have already made their investment,” McCoy said. “Their return, ultimately, is their safety.”